

THE WASHINGTON POST
5 September 1982

ARTICLE APPEARED
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Ex-Envoy Cites Central America Tensions

U.S. Passed Up Overtures by Cuba

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The Reagan administration passed up at least three initiatives by the Cuban government during the past 18 months to reduce tensions in Central America, the State Department's former top representative in Havana charges in a Foreign Policy magazine article released today.

The administration also exaggerated the extent of Cuban arms shipments to leftist rebels in the region, writes Wayne S. Smith, chief of the U.S. interests section in Havana until he resigned from the Foreign Service last month.

The U.S. evidence on arms shipments "has never been solid," according to Smith. "While some arms have been sent from Cuba to El Salvador, the quantities are almost certainly far less than alleged. If the guerrillas had received all the arms reported by U.S. intelligence, the Salvadoran army would be outgunned by 20 to 1."

The current U.S. posture is consistent with a record of two decades of militant confrontation toward Cuban leader Fidel Castro that has time and again worked against the best interests of the United States, Smith contends in the fall issue of Foreign Policy.

His sharp public criticism represents a rare case in which an official who has served at the fulcrum of a major foreign policy issue decided to leave the Foreign Service, and the anonymous channels of internal dissent, to speak out. Prior to his 1979-1982 Havana assignment, Smith was director of the State Department's Office of Cuban Affairs from 1977 to 1979.

Such resignations are highly unusual, but Smith is the second senior diplomat to leave in the Reagan administration because of differences over Central American policy.

The former ambassador to El Salvador, Robert E. White, took a similar step after being removed as envoy shortly after President Reagan took office. White also has since been outspoken in his criticism of U.S. policy in the region.

A State Department spokesman said yesterday in response to Smith's article that "successive U.S. administrations from President Kennedy onward have been concerned about Cuba's arms buildup and its persistent efforts to interfere in the domestic affairs of Latin American countries and of countries outside this hemisphere.

"All have sought to dissuade Cuba and its Soviet backers from these efforts. Unfortunately, concerted efforts to export revolution and subversion have long characterized Cuban policy.... We have made it clear on numerous occasions that a change in Cuban behavior, not just a change in rhetoric is what is required."

In his article, "Dateline Havana: Myopic Diplomacy," Smith details three initiatives by the Cubans to open talks with the United States on the growing confrontation over El Salvador and Nicaragua: the first shortly after Reagan took office in early 1981, the second in the late spring of last year and the third this past April.

Each time, Smith writes, the Cubans either were rebuffed or met with silence.

Smith says the first initiative came immediately after the Salvadoran army defeated a rebel defensive in January, 1981.

Cuba and Nicaragua had increased their support for the Salvadoran rebels in anticipation of the offensive, he says, but after it was defeated Havana and Managua "reevaluated their positions. Very shortly after Reagan's inauguration, arms shipments declined."

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